

The Historic Water Tower: Chicago's Gem

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In the middle of a city known for its towers of glass and steel, stands a tower made of stone that looks out of place. It has been Chicago's one of most cherished landmarks for over a century. Its survival through the city's greatest disasters is a symbol of Chicago's indomitable spirit.

The Water Tower was built by one of Chicago's earliest architects, William W. Boyington. The original design changed many times, and in 1867, construction on the final design commenced. Located at 806 North Michigan Avenue, the unique design could be seen for miles. The building was constructed out of Joliet limestone blocks quarried in Illinois, which was a substitution for the commonly used Indiana limestone.



Chicago Water Tower, Chicago. Courtesy of the Illinois State Historical Library, Mary Michals, Iconographer.

The Water Tower was not built to be a monument for the city of Chicago, but to conceal a standpipe. The standpipe stands 138 feet tall and is 3 feet in diameter. The standpipe served to equalize the water pressure flowing in from the Pumping Station across the street. The station was also designed by William W. Boyington.

The Old Water Tower was designed in a castellated, Gothic style. The saw-toothed towers were designed to capture the romance of a small medieval castle. It can also be described as a dark, Gothic styled building. Some say it looks more like a thirteenth-century European castle rather than a water tower. While its octagonal form incorporates Gothic architectural elements, its slender tower, crowned by wide windows and a balcony, has a minaret quality, according to one account. The steel and copper roof was constructed to contrast and bring color to the yellowish limestone blocks.

The foundation of the Water Tower consists of 168 columns. Each is filled with concrete and is capped with a 12-inch square of oak. Huge, massive stones lay in the cement, to enhance the architecture of the building. This completes the base of the building to the top of the structure. The towers rise in five sections from the base, at ground level, with battlement pillars. There are more pillars at each of the four corners. Each of the 40-foot sides is built with two grand, arched windows. Also, on each side is a stately doorway, which brings a warm, cozy feeling to the dark building.

The sections above those pillars, the second and third sections, are similar in design. They rise in diminishing size and also consist of balconies. The building's octagonal tower is centered and sits on the top the third section. The whole building rises 154 feet above ground level. At the time of its construction, the Water Tower was one of the world's tallest buildings. Never were there so many cupolas, buttress, pinnacles, and towers grouped together on one spot;

none but a true artist could have arranged them into so harmonious whole. This is the praise of one art critic. Inside this architectural revelation, is a design deserving the same designation. A grand spiral staircase encircled the standpipe. The Water Tower's cupola held the main control station. With the controls always being watched, the tower included a wonderful sleeping room with marvelous archways.

The Old Water Tower's architecture served more than one purpose. Besides being a work of art, the choice of construction materials helped it to be one of the few buildings to survive the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. As the fire began to roar across the town, it raced from one wooden building to the next. When the fire finally reached the original stone Water Tower, the building withstood the flames. As the fire died, the Water Tower stood as a guidepost to the charred ruins that were ragged and broken.

The Water Tower was renovated twice. The first time it was renovated was between 1913 and 1916. During this period, every one of the six million limestone blocks was changed. Minor repairs were made to the interior of the tower, to the archways and staircases. Amazingly, the construction was completed by only ten construction workers and over 500 volunteers.

The most recent renovation to the Water Tower was during 1978. At this time minor repairs were made to the details in the architecture of the buildings. In the interior, the standpipe was removed and the information office was remodeled. A movie screen and a small viewing area were added in a room off to the right of the main entrance.

Since the 1970s, the historic Water Tower has served as a tourist information office. Currently a theater runs movies on the history of Chicago—usually about the fire—which are shown ten times a day. An information desk gives tourist information on interesting places in Chicago.

In May 1969, during the Water Tower's centennial anniversary, the American Water Works Association selected the Old Water Tower to be the first American water landmark. According to attendance records, the historic water tower became the third major tourist attraction in Chicago.

The Water Tower adds a unique value to Chicago as an architectural city. Its unique architecture allowed it to survive the worse disaster in Chicago history. The Water Tower is one of the selected few to be considered Chicago gems, known through-out the nation. [From Chicago Water Tower, "Chicago Avenue Water Tower and Pumping Station," <http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/chicago/c4.htm> (Oct. 5, 2003); Chicago Water Tower, "Exploring Chicago," <http://www.ci.chi.il.us/Tourism/ThingsToDo/citygallery/watertower.html> (Oct. 5, 2003); Chicago Water Tower, "Haunted Tower," <http://ebeltz.net/fieldtrips/Chicago/michage.html> (Oct. 5, 2003); Chicago Water Tower, "Historic Water Tower," <http://www.aviewoncities.com/Chicago/watertower.htm> (Oct. 5, 2003); Chicago Water Tower, "Old Water Tower," <http://web.ask.com/redir?bgd=http%3a%2f%2fweb.ask.com%2fwb%3fq%3dwhere%2bc.html> (Oct. 5, 2003); Chicago Water Tower, "Water Tower," <http://hoogbouw.nl/02forum/cgi-bin/topic.cgi?forum=3&topic=46> (Oct. 5, 2003); Water, "Centennial Anniversary," <http://chicago.about.com/gi/dynamics/offsite.htm?site=http3a%2f%2fcpl.lib.uic.edu%2f004chicago%2ftimeline%2fwatertower.htm> (Oct. 5, 2003); David G. Lowe, *Lost Chicago*; Franz Schulz and Kevin Harrington, *Chicago's Famous Buildings*.]